Book Reviews

EDITED BY KATRIEN G. JANIN
Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge

Assemblage Thought and Archaeology
BY BEN JERVIS

2019. London: Routledge
Hbk. 187 pp. 18 B/w illus.
ISBN: 9781138067493

REVIEWED BY THOMAS MATTHEWS BOEHMER
Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge

Ben Jervis's passionate, slim-line survey of assemblage thought is an important distillation of the present state of material cultural studies within the discipline of theoretical archaeology. Purporting to defy the allegedly constricting bond of modern western thought, Jervis's *Assemblage Thought and Archaeology* outlines his sense of Deleuze and Guattari's (hereafter, *DG*) writings on *agencement* and disentangles their ideas from other recent and relevant theory-driven analyses of material culture (for example, by Ian Hodder, Tim Ingold, and Bruno Latour) (Chapter One). The following chapters deepen our understanding of assemblage thought (Chapter Two), use the

core concepts alongside evaluations of examples of, first, material culture (Chapter Three), and, then, urban spaces (Chapter Four), before finally considering the ways in which assemblages might enliven archaeological practice and heritage management (Chapter Five). At its best, this volume clarifies and so makes useful aspects of *DG* writings; writings that are often difficult to decode, especially in translation.

However, conceptually helpful though this may be, Jervis does not escape the familiar problems which dog many theoretically interested discussions in archaeology. Rather than intertwining the actual subject matter (archaeology) with the theory from the beginning, as would be most demonstrably useful, the book follows the usual structure of introducing the reader to the finer points of its chosen theoretical approach before it brings that theory to the evidence. It might be argued that in a book that essentially serves as a primer for a certain theoretical direction, this should be allowed. Yet, at the same time, this style of writing questions one of the basic premises of Jervis's work: that assemblage thought is a methodology, and more than a theory (88). In this claim, Jervis echoes other recent theoretical works with an archaeological focus, including van Oyen's (2016a).

The fact that Jervis physically distinguishes between his chapters, using some to discuss the application of assemblage thought to archaeology (Chapters Three–Five), and another to the evaluation of this theory (Chapter Two), does little to support this main assertion of his. Additionally, it feeds an apprehension that the difference between the approach accentuated here and that of a rigorous contextual archaeology is very slight. After all, as seen for example in Swift's (2010) article on migrant identities, an archaeology that looks at objects in their historical context also can move between different geographic and temporal scales whilst linking objects and people together (see more below). Nor, finally, does his assertion adequately counter the critical stance of archaeologists like Murray (2013) who believe that it is in material culture and the history of archaeology

that we would find better, more relevant, and more sympathetic conceptualisations of our evidence.

I am myself responsive to Jervis's case. Having an awareness of things as constant processes of becoming is important and can be used to re-evaluate or serve as a counterweight to discourses that representationally assume that objects possess certain static meanings. I do not believe though that these directions and ideas sit "in opposition to modernist boundaries" (15). The book never takes the time to explore or define what is actually meant by 'modernist boundaries'. And, in blithely assuming that there is such a bounded and identifiable entity as 'modern', Jervis leaves himself open to critique (and contradicts his own emphasis on the mutability of all things).

In this light, it is surprising and perhaps indicative that the book's cover image shows a portion of the Cubist Juan Gris's 1915 *Still Life with Checked Tablecloth*. Cubism, we remember, emphasised how a subject might be looked at from a number of different perspectives and on a whole range of different planes. The vivacity that this brings to depictions of selections of objects is obvious and throws into relief by contrast the rather static quality, over one-hundred years later, of Jervis's own 'vibrant assemblages' abstracted from reality, ungrounded in the history of these ideas. Indeed, if we were to press this point, we might ask to what extent we need to use *DG* as a starting point when cubism teaches us that the inclusion of a number of differing (but interconnected) perspectives may lead to deeper archaeological understandings.

Despite the comparable emphasis on *DG*, Jervis's assemblage thought is not however exactly comparable to Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory. Though DeLanda might be one of the main communicators of Deleuzian ideas to a modern audience, Jervis does not seek to copy him *verbatim*. As he explains, Jervis develops from *DG*'s and DeLanda's works an expansive stance that is also partially constructed out of parts of other scholars' theories (34: "[i]t can be narrowly defined in terms of the application of the writing of [*DG*],

as well as of DeLanda's interpretation of this work, to archaeological research, or more expansively as taking a lead from this writing, but drawing upon other related, but not identical, approaches"). Seemingly, Jervis's assemblage thought is (neatly) in itself an all-encompassing 'bricolage' or assemblage of ideas of how to talk about material culture (37).

As Jervis is at pains to assert, even if it is different from Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), entanglement theory, and symmetrical archaeology (and their derivations), assemblage thought deploys aspects of these approaches and similar terminologies to make the point "that the world can be thought of as consisting of flows of matter, things, ideas and energy" (73). The approach is a unifying way forward in that it represents itself as a break with past conceptualisations, mirroring the structure of archaeological critical discourse since Shanks and Tilley's (1987a; 1987b) important volumes. It is in this play on the utile unifying quality of assemblage thought that we get a greater indication of how Jervis understands it to be more effective than (say) contextual archaeology. For, in bringing different and disparate ideas about archaeological evidence bases together (in Chapters Three and Four) through the deployment of the vocabulary of assemblage thought then it is possible that a more fruitful and more mutually understandable archaeology results. Certainly, there would be fewer theoretical 'camps' and a greater common discourse. And yet, by falling into the trap of utilising yet again the rhetoric of breaks and new beginnings, Jervis's book becomes the less distinguishable from them and something of the dynamism of his work is lost.

Jervis's interest in making assemblage thought useful is undoubtedly commendable. Particularly striking in this volume is his emphasis on the 'resonance' of 'assemblage' to archaeologists (37), and the related suggestion in Chapter Five that heritage conservation and physical archaeological practice would be positively impacted by incorporating some of the ideas underlying assemblage thought. Furthermore, Jervis's review in this same chapter of the degree to which the 'inscribing' of a 'monument or building' into heritage documentation is 'transformative', thought-provokingly shows how this process can

lead to abrupt and problematic change through the example of the controversy surrounding Old Oswestry hillfort, Shropshire (159–160). It is here, and in related instances, that the vocabulary provided by assemblage thought comes across as most persuasive in explaining more fully a very specific situation. Moreover, at those points where Jervis carefully evaluates the research of other scholars, he shows how their arguments can be brought into the framework he has outlined. This is the case both in his tackling of Lawrence and Wilkinson's work on early urbanisation (122–124), and in his highlighting of Nugent and Williams's review of Anglo-Saxon cremation urns (26). These impressive incorporations of apparently unrelated research into Jervis's analytical framework give his book real traction.

I will close by making a comparison with Astrid van Oyen's not unrelated research, a comparison partially prompted by Jervis's reference to it (2013; 2016a; 2016b). Through the course of several pieces of writing, van Oyen expands upon Latour's ANT in order to think more creatively and constructively about *terra sigillata*, and its production and consumption in the past. Most importantly, though she makes the same points about problematic western modern thought as Jervis, van Oyen is able to counter some of the criticisms made above with a more directed discussion on how ANT allows us to go beyond a rigorous contextual archaeology and discuss the relevance of these objects to the history of the western portion of the Roman Empire (2016b: 361–362). A very specific view not fully realised during the course of Jervis's book.

That said, Jervis's study needs to be considered as part of the greater oeuvre of theoretically driven writing in archaeology. For instance, Rachel Crellin and Gavin Lucas are both acknowledged and referenced by Jervis; and Lucas has also written a Routledge thematic work. Jervis's ambitious textbook slots into this wider movement, and its critical insights into present directions within archaeological and material cultural thinking will remain important for some time.

References

Murray, T. 2013. Why the history of archaeology is essential to theoretical archaeology. *Complutum* 24(2): 21–31.

van Oyen, A. 2013. Towards a post-colonial artefact analysis *Archaeological Dialogues* 20(1): 80–107.

van Oyen, A. 2016a. *How Things Make History: The Roman Empire and its Terra Sigillata*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

van Oyen, A. 2016b. Historicising Material Agency: from Relations to Relational Constellations. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 23(1): 354–378.

Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1987a. *Re-constructing Archaeology. Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.

Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1987b. *Social Theory and Archaeology*. Oxford: Polity.

Swift, E. 2010. Identifying Migrant Communities: A Contextual Analysis of Grave Assemblages from Continental Late Roman Cemeteries. *Britannia* 41: 237–282.